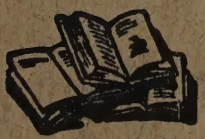
To Capt. Rockwell
with compliments of
Haywood Parker

Recollections and Observations of The Reconstruction Era

By HAYWOOD PARKER



(Text of a paper read before The Pen and Plate Club of Asheville, June 19, 1930, by Mr. Haywood Parker of the Asheville Bar)

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MR. PARKER'S REMINISCENCES

(Editorial from Asheville Citizen, June 29, 1930)

THE paper which Mr. Haywood Parker of the Asheville Bar read before the Pen and Plate Club at its last meeting, and which The Citizen is privileged to publish this morning, is as fine a picture of the changing scenes which followed one another in North Carolina between 1865 *and* 1900 *as we can remember to have read. Mr. Parker, who was born during the War Between the States, saw the passing of one civilization and the emergence of another. In this delightfully written paper he mirrors first the idyllic life of the old plantation, then the gathering of the storm as the new forces released by the downfall of the Confederacy gained in violence, then the fusing of the whites, under outside pressure, and finally the emergence, with growing power, of that element of the white population which, under the old regime, had never as a class enjoyed, except in the most limited measure, the privileges and opportunities of citizenship.*

Emerson, writing of Montaigne, said of the words of the great French essayist, "Cut them, they bleed!" He meant that Montaigne's words were living things; and they were living things because they were a part of the man himself. After more than three centuries Montaigne still lives on and men to whom the France of the sixteenth century is utterly alien can nevertheless read his writings with the same fresh delight with which they were read when they first came from the French print shops. These recollections of Mr. Parker have this vital quality. As one reads them one feels the ebb and flow of the tides of mighty forces; and this feeling is the stronger because of the classic restraint which Mr. Parker has practised.

In this paper, Mr. Parker, it seems to us, has done something truly extraordinary. The paper is so short that it can be read in half an hour or less; but it mirrors a whole epoch, it brings out clearly and beautifully both the strength and weaknesses of the system that long prevailed in the South and likewise the responsibilities and dangers and benefits of the new system that succeeded it. The author

has written with a lively recollection. He has also written with a mature judgment.

> *"Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail*
> *Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,*
> *Dispraise or blame."*

Mr. Parker sets down that which he saw and that which he has pondered in his heart. He loved the old order. He does not say so in words but his love of it stands out in the happy memories which he recalls. But his love is without repining; for he rejoices in the larger opportunities born of the passing of the ancient regime and the dawning of a new day in which democracy in North Carolina has become meaningful and purposeful to a degree which would never have been possible but for the agonies through which the South was called upon to pass.

WHEN Henry Grady delivered his eloquent toast at the New England Society banquet in 1886, he did more than give currency to the phrase "New South"; he injected a distinct stimulant into the thinking of the new generation of the South just then reaching its majority and preparing to take its part on the stage, a generation born amid the turmoil of sectional civil war, whose childhood was shadowed by the despondency of defeat and the threatening clouds of reconstruction, and whose youth was spent in the twilight of a passing civilization. Being of that generation, I have recently had the recollections of my childhood deeply stirred by Claude Bowers' entertaining book "The Tragic Era," and I have thought these recollections might be of some interest to you. I shall try to present them tersely and truthfully, and I assure you they are not mere figments of the imagination. They will, of course, be very personal and very sketchy, which I know you will understand and forgive.

I was born during the Civil War on a cotton plantation in Eastern North Carolina which my parents had purchased when they married in 1852. Containing about 700 acres, it was a typical plantation of that section, which had been settled more than a hundred years before the war of the revolution. My parents' dwelling, which the negroes always spoke of as "de gret house" was very old, and in colonial times had been a well known tavern and stopping place for the old stage coaches on the route from Philadelphia to Charleston. The dwelling was on a hill that sloped back from a stream about the size of Swannanoa River called Fishing Creek; on a companion hill just across a small branch were the negro quarters, and much of my early childhood was spent with the little negroes, playing around these cabins, wading in the branch, making "frog houses" in the wet sand, and exploring the nearby woods. I pay this tribute to them, my little black playmates,—I do not remember having heard them use any dirty, filthy language or be guilty of any nasty conduct; they were just normal, natural little human beings, vivacious, imaginative; healthy and active; the best playmates a little child ever had. Of course we squabbled, but we

were ruled with sternness by the old mammies who believed firmly in the efficacy of the switch, and whose positive commands were promptly obeyed. The negroes on the plantation had all been slaves of my father, and continued to occupy the same cabins—and they boasted "dat dare aint no new niggers on dis place." The plantation was their home, and they loved it; many of them lived there until they died. They had a personal interest and a feeling of part ownership in the plantation and everything on it; they spoke of the plantation as "our place," and generally it was "our crops," "our cows," "our mules," and even "our carriage and horses." They were very childlike, but very serious in this attitude of ownership. Mr. John S. Wise once told this story; he said his father called all his negroes together immediately after Appomattox and told them the war was over and they were free and they would have to take care of themselves, and he would thereafter pay them for their work. Turning to old Peter, who had been a notoriously lazy and loafing, but good natured slave, Mr. Wise told Peter he certainly would have to mend his ways if he expected to get money for his work. Peter only grinned. After several months, Peter continuing as lazy and unreliable as of old, notwithstanding several warnings, Mr. Wise finally said to him, "Well, Peter, I have put up with you just as long as I can, and the time has now come when we must part. Now that's final, I have made up my mind." With a sad and puzzled expression, old Peter looked at him and said: "Lord, Marse John, us got to part? I shore is sorry 'bout dat—Marse John, where is you gwine?"

Doctoring the Darkeys

When a new baby arrived at any of the cabins or any of the old people were very sick, my mother was a certain visitor, giving words of advice and comfort, and I frequently accompanied her, as escort and gift bearer of some delicacy from the "gret house." In ordinary sickness, the negroes came to the house for advice and medicine. As I recollect it now, quinine, blue mass and castor oil were the three standard medicines. Father laid in a supply of these each spring. I have a very vivid mental picture of the five

ounce Powers and Wightman quinine bottles. I had to take the stuff myself; it was sometimes given in molasses, but mostly in water and was vile. I have seen father administer it to a batch of eight or ten negroes at a time. Castor oil was bought by the gallon, and had to be kept under lock and key, for the negroes dearly loved it. I remember going several times with father to the cabins when he visited the sick. No doctor in his rounds of a modern hospital ever met with more punctilious respect. All the negroes, big and little, arose as he entered the cabin, and remained standing while he sat by the bed of the sick one. After going through the ceremony so familiar to us all of feeling the pulse and looking at the tongue, and asking a few very personal questions, father would give a few words of instructions in a firm, kindly tone, and frequently he would take out his little round box, gouge out a wad of blue mass with his pocket knife, roll a pill in the palm of his hand, and administer it then and there to the patient. Faith and obedience were cardinal virtues of the negroes. Father was head surgeon of the plantation too. It was great fun to watch him bring out his forceps and yank a tooth from the swollen jaw of a moaning negro or lance a boil that had been brought to the ripe stage by plasters of Gray's ointment.

Pleasant Days

The plantation as I recollect it was a little world in itself, and as a child, I enjoyed watching the various operations. I have spent many happy hours watching "Uncle Cary," the old blacksmith, blow up the wheezing old bellows until he had the iron just the right glow for the anvil —and then the music of the hammers, as George, his helper, swung the sledge and he the tapper. Uncle Cary did blacksmithing for the community, but his chief work was to keep the horses and mules properly shod and the farm vehicles and implements in repair. Horse shoes and strip iron were bought, but Uncle Cary made his own charcoal.

There were other pleasant days when I sat perched on the large work bench amid the tools while I watched Uncle Hilliard, the plantation carpenter, shape spokes for a

wagon wheel or work a wide plank into a coffin for some one of the neighborhood. A funeral was a function on the plantation, especially if there was the slightest element of tragedy in the death. You must remember we had few things to stir the emotions.

Another childhood entertainment was watching the old mammies twirling the spinning wheels in their different cabins as they spun the carded cotton into thread to be worked up into cloth by Aunt Penny, the old weaver, after it had been dipped in the different dyes made from copperas, roots, herbs and the indigo plant which was regularly grown in a corner of the big garden. There was no shoemaker on our plantation, but Uncle Isham, the shoemaker on the Arrington plantation nearby, did our work. The Arrington plantation also had a tanning vat where father carried the hides to be made into leather.

"Poor White Trash"

Across the creek from our plantation lived several small farmers and their white tenants. None of these owned slaves, they did all their own work, agricultural and domestic. They were called by the negroes "poor white trash." My earliest instructions in social distinctions were the very positive injunctions of the old black mammies that under no circumstances was I ever to be caught associating with the children of these "poor white trash." I do not remember any such prohibitions from my mother, nor did she ever speak of them with any such contempt. I noticed, however, that none of their women folk visited my mother socially, nor did she visit them. With my father, however, it was different. His regiment had been recruited from that neighborhood and most of these men were his old soldiers. He was devoted to them and they to him. He knew and called each one by his first name, and he was "Colonel" to each and all of them, and to all the members of their families. Many a mile have I ridden perched up behind my father on horseback as he went from one to the other of these humble homes, giving a cheery greeting, and receiving an affectionate welcome, wherever he went. They never tired of talking war and I was thrilled as I listened

to their reminiscences of camps and battles. Often as we rode away my father would say, "Ah, Son, there's a real man, as brave and good a soldier as ever fired a gun—man you can trust and tie to." These men were always made welcome in our home and they came frequently, usually in twos and threes. I will say in passing that my father kept a well stocked sideboard, and these old soldiers were much more at ease around the sideboard than they were around the dinner table. They never brought their women folk with them, however.

Within a radius of ten miles there were several neighborhoods in which these small farmowners and tenant farmers outnumbered the slave-holding plantation owners, and in the Central and Western parts of North Carolina they greatly predominated. The census of 1860 gave North Carolina a population of 992,622, made up as follows:

Whites	629,942
Slaves	331,059
Free negroes	31,621

Estimating five persons to the family there were then 125,988 white families. There were 34,658 slave owners. Presuming that each slave owner was the head of a family it will be seen that only 27.3 per cent of the white families owned slaves, while 72.7 per cent of the white families owned no slaves. Expressed in terms of individuals: of the 629,942 whites only 171,975 had any property interest in slaves, while 457,967 had no property interest in slavery.

Few Large Slave Owners

The 1860 Census also shows that no slave holder in the state owned as many as 500 slaves. The following tabulation shows the distribution of ownership:

6440,	each	owned			1	slave
9631,	"	"	from	2 to	5	slaves
8449,	"	"	"	5 "	10	"
6075,	"	"	"	10 "	20	"
3321,	"	"	"	25 "	50	"
611,	"	"	"	50 "	100	"
118,	"	"	"	100 "	200	"
11,	"	"	"	200 "	300	"
3,	"	"	"	300 "	500	"

An analysis of these figures shows that only 8.4 per cent of the white families of the State owned as many as 10 slaves each, 14.3 per cent of the families owned as many as 2 and less than 5 each, 4.6 per cent owned one slave each, while 72.7 owned no slaves at all, and probably never had owned any.

This condition was fraught with grave possibilities and long prior to the Civil War there were many premonitory rumblings and menacing complaints against the economic and social evils of slavery, and the continuation of slavery was possible only because of the intense animosity existing between the negro slaves and the non-slave holding whites;—only because they were negroes were slaves tolerated. The negro slaves, imbibing the spirit of their masters, held the non-slave holder in contempt, he was to them "poor white trash," beyond the social pale, and the non-slave holder despised the negro slave and resented the arrogance of the master. No man can now say how long this blighted majority of non-slave holding whites, nearly three-fourths of the white population, would have remained passive if no outside force had entered. It came in war. Why and by whom brought is not now under consideration; apparently it came from without, thrust on them, and it instantly unified and solidified the white. North Carolina furnished 121,000 troops to the Confederate Armies, approximately one-fifth of its white population. The manhood of the State, slave holder and non-slave holder, plantation owner and smaller farmer, aristocrat and poor white trash, all together, was tried and tested in the same terrible crucible of war. When defeat came, the ex-slave holding Colonel and the non-slave holding private, the aristocrat and the "poor white trash" returned home with respect for the tested bravery and genuine manhood of each other, and with the mutual love of comrades in arms. Each tried to pick up life and carry on as formerly and for a while things did move on practically as before, the same manners and customs and social habits prevailed. The ex-slave holding aristocrats and the "poor white trash" were socially as far apart as ever, but the menfolk of all classes had learned in the terrible school of war to respect, admire,

and in many cases to love each other. It is interesting, but useless to speculate just to what extent this would have persisted and what effect it would have had in breaking down social barriers if no outside influence had entered in, for such an outside influence did come through the acts of Congress and the Constitutional Amendments,—the Reconstruction, so called:—

"That hideous orgy of anarchy, violence, unrestrained corruption, undisguised, ostentatious, insulting robbery; that grotesque burlesque of government whose vices, follies and crimes remained for many years the policital, economic and social afflictions of those States which had formed the Confederacy."

The First Rift

The first rift I remember in the pleasant relations between me and my little black playmates came in 1868, caused by politics. Some of the little negroes were wearing little campaign pins with the pictures of Grant and Colfax. I was crazy for one. My older brother explained to me that I must not wear that kind, and he gave me one with the pictures of Seymour and Blair. Pinning it on, I marched proudly over to the cabins and joining my playmates I boasted that I was a Democrat. I was grabbed by a half grown negro girl who called me a dirty little rebel, snatched off my precious badge of Democracy, turned me across her lap, gave me a good spanking and told me to go home and never bring another pin like that over there. That was my first Democratic "licking." I was so chagrined and shamed that I never mentioned it to my parents, but bore it in silence, as I have so many Democratic defeats since.

From that time on I noticed a change in the negroes, the half grown ones especially. Winnie, who spanked me, and her eighteen-year-old brother boasted to me that their family was going to move into the "gret house" when Grant was elected and my ma was going to cook for them and my pa was going to drive the carriage when they went to ride. I told my parents of these boasts and I can remember now the significant glances they gave each other. Within the next few years I noticed mother's visits to the sick in the

cabins practically ceased, though her bounty continued. Neither she nor my sister ever went anywhere alone. Out of her presence the young negroes ceased to call her "Mistiss" or to call father "Marster." They boasted to me that only God was their Master. I shall never forget my childish indignation the first time I heard a negro man address father as "Colonel Parker." I thought it presumptuous familiarity and I expected to see him struck down for his impudence. My father gave him a withering look in dignified silence, which cowed him instantly.

About that time father cleaned and oiled his old army pistol and hung it on the head of his bed, and there it stayed until after 1876. Father's old soldiers became more frequent visitors, and when father was away at night, as he frequently was, one of them usually spent the night in our home. The negroes became restless and at times sullen, but most of the time they were simply noisy and boastful. They were constantly talking politics and about voting. Things were all topsy-turvy to my child mind. By the time I was ten years old, conditions had so changed that I no longer had any playmates among the little negroes,—they were all going to the free school, while I was studying alone and reciting to my mother.

The Election of 1876

There were a few restless, hectic years, and then came the Election of 1876. I again proudly wore a Democratic badge, and this time it was not snatched off, nor did I get a licking. It was a Democratic year, the State was redeemed, Vance was elected Governor and Tilden was elected President. It had been a grim and determined campaign and the whites had voted solidly together, all past differences and social distinctions were forgotten in the common fight for white supremacy. My father had spent many days and nights away from home canvassing and organizing the voters of the county. There was no hullabaloo rejoicing, it was no ordinary political campaign, it was a fight. The joy of the victors was generally expressed by quiet smiles on determined faces. There was an air of satisfaction and certainty in the groups of men who were frequently at our

home at that time and the old sideboard drew them like a magnet. I remember my father cautioned me not to crow over or even talk to the negroes about the election. I suspect he feared Winnie's ardent Republicanism smarting under defeat would resent my Democratic boast as she had my Democratic badge, which might have started something. Father afterwards told me that the whites were taking every precaution to prevent any disorder which would give the Federal authorities—the Carpet Baggers—the slightest excuse for taking any action. They were not afraid of the negroes,—they knew how to handle them.

I remember at a school entertainment given at Christmas time that year one of the young ladies sang "Tenting tonight on the old Camp Ground" and the old soldiers present and the young men too applauded again and again with the old rebel yell. Years afterwards my father told me that his old soldiers would have volunteered to a man to fight for the seating of Tilden.

Changes and Yet More Changes

Many changes had taken place on the old plantation by 1876. Only two of the cabins on the hill opposite the "Gret House" were then occupied. Some of the former occupants had moved to neighboring plantations; others had moved into cabins which father had built for them at scattered places on the plantation and had become "croppers," who worked their crops under the general supervision and direction of my father but worked only when they pleased, paying a part of the crop for rent, and who had to "find themselves, i. e., furnish their own supplies which was done through the "time merchants" by mortgages on crops to be planted. Father quit issuing weekly rations and no longer bought molasses and sugar by the barrel. Uncle Cary, the old blacksmith, had moved away, rats had gnawed holes in the old bellows and the old shop was going to decay; Uncle Hilliard the old carpenter was no more, and people were sending to town for coffins. Old Aunt Penny, the weaver, was dead, too, and the old weave shed was silent and the old loom was covered with dust and "dirt dobbers" nests. The negroes no longer wore home-

spun copperas-dyed breeches, but old blue army clothes were much in evidence, especially the old blue army overcoats with their capes and brass buttons, bought in town.

Other changes had gradually crept in also. Mother now occasionally made a social visit to old Mrs. Jenkins and her other neighbors across the creek, and there was frequent swapping of turkey eggs and jelly recipes. I had found Mrs. Jenkins' young son Tom a very agreeable fishing and hunting companion, and a pretty decent sort of chap generally. My older sister had started a little private school in the neighborhood and some of the boys and girls from across the creek attended; they held their own pretty well in the recitation room and excelled on the playground. Some of the girls were pretty too. One of them, the daughter of a small farmer, a little blue-eyed blond, always aroused my greatest zeal when we played "drop the handkerchief." The rules of the game entitled me to a kiss if I caught her. General Harrison's 18-year-old son, John, had gone to work as a fireman on the railroad, to the shock and scandalization of his old aunts who felt that he had disgraced the family.

The reconstruction born of the vindictive animosities of Thad Stevens and his like had solidified the whites of the South. They were no longer Whigs or Democrats, plantation owner or small farmer, aristocrat or "poor white trash," ex-soldier or shirker—they were all Southern whites with one common purpose—the preservation of their civilization and the maintenance of white supremacy.

Reconstruction and Its Overthrow

Writing of this period, Dr. Connor of our university says:

"As reconstruction rested on the basis of a solid black vote, so its overthrow was accomplished by a solid white vote. It is well to remember that such political solidarity was a new thing in the South. Before 1868 the same political divisions existed here as existed elsewhere in the country; it was reconstruction that made the South solid. In 1876 the great mass of the white voters of North Caro-

lina, regardless of former divisions, welded into a single party and led by an old-time Whig who would have challenged to mortal combat anybody who had called him a Democrat before 1868, rose in revolt against the reconstruction government and swept the spoilers from their places of power and pillage.

"The political order which this victory placed in control of the state for the next two decades was dubbed by its opponents the 'Bourbon Democracy.' They meant to imply by that term that the ante-bellum slave-holding oligarchy, having 'learned nothing and forgotten nothing,' had returned to power bent upon restorating the old regime. There was a certain element of truth in the implication. Elderly statesmen—mostly ex-Confederate colonels and brigadiers—whose minds dwelt chiefly on the 'glories' of the past and the 'degradation' of the present, controlled the party machinery and exhausted their political genius in the twin tasks of keeping the negro out of office and themselves in. High-minded patriotic men, they furnished clean, honest government, and assured the political supremacy of the white race, but they little understood the social and economic problems of the new day."

A New Power Appears

And they little realized also that a new power had appeared in the politics of the South—the power of the common man—the emancipated never slave-holding small land owner and the white tenant farmer. A power slow to be recognized by the holders themselves. It was the mutterings and rumblings of this power protesting against economic wrongs which disturbed the late '80s, and breaking with fury in the '90s, "wrested the scepter from the Gordons, the Hamptons and the Vances of the old order to confer it upon the Watsons, the Tillmans and the Butlers of the new."

In North Carolina, after a short misalliance and debauch this power came to itself, repented, and under the wise guidance and leadership of one of its own, Charles B. Aycock, it once more successfully championed the cause of

white supremacy and consecrated itself with religious fervor to the cause of public education and good roads; and thus has been one of the most potent influences in the modern, the real reconstruction of North Carolina.

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